

North County Times / Riverside
May 27, 2004

News: Top Stories

Train use soaring across region

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

TEMECULA ---- The number of Southern Californians crossing the region by rail soared 12-fold over the last quarter century, and trains will be more important in the future, regional planners said Thursday.

But first, measures are needed to boost passenger capacity of commuter and inter-city rail systems.

Rail's rapid rise in the transportation arena was highlighted at the semi-annual meeting of a pair of regional planning agencies: the San Diego Association of Governments of San Diego County, and **Southern California Association of Governments**, which covers Riverside, Imperial, Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura and San Bernardino counties. The four-hour meeting took place at a Temecula resort.

Linda Culp, a transportation planner with the San Diego association, said the number of regional train travelers has increased from 1 million a year in the late 1970s to more than 12 million.

A quarter century ago, the only cross-regional train travel was on board Amtrak, the national passenger railroad, Culp said. And the number of Amtrak riders has doubled in the years since.

But with the addition of the L.A. region's Metrolink in 1991 and San Diego County's Coaster in 1995, both of them commuter rail systems, train use surged exponentially. Today, Metrolink riders total about 9 million a year and the Coaster 1.5 million, according to Culp's report.

Train use would be even higher if capacity problems weren't holding systems back, officials said. Lack of available parking is restricting growth, and so is size of trains.

"The problem we have now is not having enough cars on our trains," said Temecula City Councilman Ron Roberts, referring to Metrolink. "People are standing up all the way." He said Metrolink is trying to buy additional cars from a Seattle rail line that has a surplus of them.

Metrolink operates several commuter lines linking outlying areas with coastal job markets, including one from Riverside to downtown Los Angeles and another from Riverside, through Corona, to Orange County.

Roberts said Metrolink plans to push 18 miles south of Riverside to Interstate 215 and Highway 74, in Perris, by 2006 or 2007.

Roberts sits on the Metrolink board of directors and serves as president of the Southern California association's Regional Council, which is composed of 76 officials from the six counties. He said efforts are under way to add a seat representing the Indian tribes of Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

To address passenger railroads' parking problem, Culp said, plans are being laid to add stalls at maxed-out stations such as Oceanside and Irvine.

Plans also have been laid to raise rail's profile.

The Southern California association is proposing to build a 275-mile system of elevated trains crisscrossing Riverside, Orange, Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties. The first line would open between downtown Los Angeles and Ontario International Airport in 2018.

The trains would operate by magnetic levitation ---- maglev ---- rather than wheels on steel rails. Powerful electric magnets would propel trains on a cushion of air at speeds up to 240 mph.

Rich Macias, association manager of transportation planning, said the system is a central feature of the agency's 2004 regional transportation plan, adopted in April. That plan also aims to cap airline traffic at Los Angeles International Airport at 78 million passengers a year ---- it's 55 million now ---- and spread air travelers among outlying airports such as Ontario, Palmdale and Palm Springs.

Macias said speedy maglev trains would connect the dots on the map that represent those airports.

One of those dots is March Air Reserve Base in western Riverside County. The association is aiming for March to handle 8 million of the 170 million passengers anticipated in Southern California north of San Diego County in 2030. San Diego County officials also have eyed March as a potential outlet for its growing air traffic. But neighborhood opposition is organizing against a March passenger airport.

"Everyone wants to fly, but no one wants an airport in their back yard," said Ventura County Supervisor Judy Mikels.

If it doubles over the next quarter-century as projected, air traffic would grow even faster than population. Twenty million people live in the seven major Southern California counties ---- including Riverside and San Diego ---- and 26 million are expected by 2030.

Riverside County is predicted to grow faster than all other large counties, topping 3 million as house shoppers continue to seek relief from the sticker shock of San Diego and Orange counties' markets ---- and a big back yard.

"People are moving here not just to save money, they are moving here to mow the lawn," said Lake Elsinore Mayor Thomas Buckley.

Contact staff writer Dave Downey at (909) 676-4315, Ext. 2616, or ddowney@californian.com